

Ἀγαπητοί, ἀγαπῶμεν ἀλλήλους, ὅτι ἡ ἀγάπη ἐκ τοῦ Θεοῦ ἐστίν.

1 John 7:4

In a 2012 book entitled *Religion for Atheists*, Alain de Botton advocates the founding of a chain of ‘*Agapē*’ restaurants where relative strangers would meet at a common table and be encouraged to make conversation. “Sitting down at a table with a group of strangers has the incomparable benefit of making it a little more difficult to hate them with impunity,” he writes.

In his *Spectator* review, A. N. Wilson quickly disposes of this idea by asking, “When did he last dine at the High Table of an Oxford college?” That may tell us something about the dining culture of other colleges (Wilson is a Magdalen man, isn’t he?), but it is totally unlike my experience at Oriel. For me and, I very much hope, for the other colleagues leaving Oriel this summer and going on to greater things, membership of this college and this common room has been a constant source of delight.

The tendency on these occasions is for those leaving to be thanked for what they have done for the college, and I’m grateful for the generous things Annette has just said, as well as several messages I’ve had during the week from others unable to be here tonight. If I’ve succeeded in being welcoming to others, appreciating their contributions, celebrating their successes, and encouraging them in their lives and work, I have to say that this hasn’t been because of any natural social grace on my part, as those who know and love me the best would no doubt affirm. Rather, it has been the constant atmosphere of acceptance, interest and support that has enabled me to reflect the grace I have received in being, when I can, gracious to others.

So the flow of thanks should very much be from me to you, for it is you who have enabled me to flourish, to pursue a career of teaching and, from time to time, a bit of research; you who have tolerated my amateur interest in your specialities, never disdaining to give a tutorial across the lunch table in Greek or French or Engineering when some puzzling but ultimately trivial enquiry has occurred to me. I should express my gratitude, too, to the stream of undergraduates who have accompanied me in my decades-long struggle to educate myself in Computer Science, tolerating the delays while I made sure some point was perfectly clear to everyone, including the tutor. Speaking of the four loves (or two of them, anyway), there has no doubt been a lot of *philia* going on here.

*Philia*, certainly: but does it rise to the level of *agapē*? Theologians say that God is free not because he could choose to do anything at all – for then the objection arises that even if omnipotent, he could not possibly make a stone so heavy that he could not lift it. Instead, God has perfect freedom to act according to his nature, a freedom to be himself and realise himself perfectly. In that respect, heaven means the freedom to be or to become our true selves, so that for me Oriel has truly been a little bit of heaven, a taste of the *agapē* that you won’t find on the menu at any restaurant.